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## **Issues and Challenges of Tourism Development in the Sik District: An Early Exploration**

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### **Abstract**

The district of Sik is the biggest in Kedah State, measuring 1,635,457.65 hectares or 1,635 square kilometres with its pristine flora and fauna. This district is also being made as an agro-tourism area by the Kedah State Government. However, the effectiveness of tourism development in Sik has not reached its optimum level. This article is focusing on the level of exploration and involvement (Butler, 1980) of tourism development in Sik. The research method involved fieldwork and interviews. The samples of this study are Sri Lovely Organic Farm, Pesisir Sungai Sik, and Ulu Muda Eco Park. The findings show the community involvement level is still low. Hence, this issue needs to be taken care of by all so that it can be beneficial to the local community.

**Keywords:** Sik, tourism development, exploration, and involvement.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Kedah Darul Aman State Government is on its way to achieving its goal to be ‘Kedah Maju’ and is planning a few development strategies. Among the main focus is in the field of tourism. As an agricultural state, agriculture-based tourism has great potential for development. Sustainable tourism packages with the preservation of the environment and culture of the local community can be complementary to rural development. In this case, the beauty of the environment can help develop the tourism industry. This is because the beauty of the environment can attract tourists from inside and outside the country. (Norazni Syaripudin, 2016).

The rise of tourists from inside and outside the country will increase the income of the local community as well as provide employment opportunities to entrepreneurs in the industry and ancillary industries (New Gaik Ling and Jabil Mapjabil, 2017). Tourism market trends from 1990 until now show changes in comparison with the ones previously. Not only traveling just for the purpose to rest and shopping in major cities, but tourists now change their purpose of traveling to places with natural attractions (*ecotourism*), rural areas with elements of agriculture (*agrotourism*), and historical heritage (*cultural and historic tourism*) (Johan Afendi Ibrahim and Mohamad Zaki Ahmad, 2008). Tourists nowadays desire to experience, to learn something new, to escape from daily routines, to feel nostalgic and exotic experiences. Kedah in general and Sik in particular can offer such tourism considering Sik as district rich in greenery.

Sik is a district located in the state of Kedah Darul Aman, Malaysia. The area of Sik district is 1635 square kilometers, 17.35% of the area of Kedah State. Its population is about 70,000. There are four regions in Sik district, namely Mukim Teloi, Mukim Jeneri, Mukim Sik, Mukim Sok. Sik District is governed by the Sik District Council. Despite the rapid development taking place in Sik, it is still an area surrounded by its natural pristine flora and fauna surroundings. The district has many tropical and recreational forest areas which are still unchanged. Apart from that, this district has also been made an agro-tourism area by the Kedah State Government.

In this regard, the effectiveness of tourism development projects in Sik is still unable to attract the number of tourists to an optimum level. Accordingly, strategies in strengthening tourism services and natural resource management need to be developed and implemented. Sik is said to be underdeveloped in terms of tourism when compared to other areas such as Baling district. Sik, surrounded by natural greenery, hides many interesting places that can be used as eco-tourism spots such as Beris Lake, Ulu Muda Eco Park, Hujan Lebat Waterfall, and many other unfeatured waterfalls. Also found in this district are interesting hot springs and caves that need to be explored and turned to be a successful “*nature-tourism*”. Hence, it is not surprising that many nature-loving tourists will definitely visit here. Among the negative effects that can be seen here is the closure of two Sik vineyards after ten years of operation. In addition to that, though Sri Lovely (Organic Valley) already gained world recognition and certification, amazingly, there are still many residents of Sik and Kedah who do not know about its existence.

This study was conducted using a descriptive qualitative method. This study involves three study areas namely Sri Lovely (Organic Valley), Dataran Persisiran Sungai Chepir and Ulu Muda Lake, Sik, Kedah. Data collection was done through interviews and secondary data. The interview was conducted on 09.09.2020 at Sri Lovely Farm, Sik, and Ulu Muda District Council. The respondents are operators and staff of each place. In obtaining the data, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

There are many researchers involve in tourism activities in Malaysia. Among all, the one focusing on Sik is Rosniza Aznie Che Rose et al. (2017) which stresses vineyard companies in Lake Beris. She studied the impact of the grape growing industry near Beris Lake on the well-being of the locals. The study showed that grape cultivation activities in Beris Lake have brought so much change to the locals in terms of basic and infrastructure facilities, ergo benefit the locals by changing their living standards.

Meanwhile, Hejrahtul Amani Halim and Zakirah Othman (2016), Nurdiana Rosdi, and Zakirah Othman (2016) conducted a study related to promotional and business strategies through the Sri Lovely website. The findings of the study identified five places or panoramas that can be used to promote Sri Lovely in cyberspace. The virtual reality panorama development techniques were done using *Dermandar* software. In addition, the study also showed that Sri Lovely website has good website features.

Next, Norazni Syaripudin (2016) analyzes the economic impact and assesses the social impact on the locals, and examines the impact of eco-tourism development on the environment in Semporna, Sabah. The results of the study found that the locals in Semporna district only see the positive impact of eco-tourism development in Semporna and not the side effects of the eco-tourism development process.

Next, the study of Harun Kurniawan (2012) looks at the development of Beris Lake maintained by Sik District Council. His study shows that tourism development projects in Beris Lake did not meet the tourism development goal. The arrival tourist rate which also did not meet the target due to the lack of promotional efforts, lack of infrastructure, and support services are the main issues and challenges in luring the private sector to invest.

Johan Afendi Ibrahim and Mohamad Zaki Ahmad (2008) were looking at the Kedah State tourism industry that begins to experience a few issues that could threaten Kedah tourism in the future. Their study discusses the impact of tourism on destinations, the reasons why the government is interested in developing the tourism industry, main tourist locations of Kedah, tourist arrival statistics by place, and the breakdown between domestic and international, current government policies and strategies on state tourism, current issues in Kedah State tourism and actions that need to be taken to overcome the problems arise.

The objectives of the study were to; (i) identify potential areas to be used as tourist attractions in Sik; and (ii) examine the pull and push factor that occurs in the sector.

## **2. DISCUSSIONS**

The development of a tourist destination is through an evolutionary process. Generally, the development of a tourist destination consisted of four stages; the level of exploration, involvement, development, and saturation. (Butler, 1980). However, this article will only discuss two stages; exploration and involvement which comprising of three main areas in Sik and known as the focus of tourists, namely Sri Lovely (Organic Valley), Dataran Persisiran Sungai Chepir, and Ulu Muda Lake, Sik, Kedah.

Sri Lovely (Organic Valley)



Fig. 1. (a) Sri Lovely Organic Farm; (b) Processing and selling organic rice area

Sri Lovely stands for System of Rice Intensification (also known as Lintang Organic Valley). It is an organic rice cultivation area in Kampung Lintang which is located in Sik district, Kedah. It was an idle and unproductive land area over 30 years ago and is now transformed into a successful organic rice cultivation area. The production of organic rice grown at a distance of 35cm x 35cm is 12 tons per hectare compared to ordinary rice



cultivation planted at a distance of 30cm x 30cm is 4.6 tons per hectare. This achievement is more than the target set by the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (MARDI) which is 3.8 tonnes per hectare. Initially, the area was cultivated by the villagers on a small scale, but the activity stopped due to various problems faced including the lack of good infrastructure and lack of financial resources. The soil has been left to cause the soil to become infertile. Through the Kedah Regional Development Authority (KEDA), with the hard work of Mr. Zakaria Kamantasha as the Chairman of Koperasi Agro Belantik Sik Sdn Bhd, the land has been redeveloped under the Agropolitan Project.

This Sri Lovely project has received attention from various parties such as MARDI, Padiberas Nasional Berhad (BERNAS), Department of Agriculture, Institutions of Higher Education such as Universiti Utara Malaysia and Universiti Sains Malaysia as well as farmers from inside and outside the country. The support received from these various parties has made Sri Lovely prominent, but in reality, the involvement from the local community, especially the local young people is still considered as low. This was personally acknowledged by Captain Zakaria, during our visit to Sri Lovely on 9 September 2020.

#### Dataran Persisiran Sungai Chepir



a



b

Fig. 2. (a) Pedestrian walkway; (b) A small square next to a pavilion



a



b

Fig. 3. (a) Pedestrian walkway; (b) Rest shelter

The name of Sik is derived from the word "Sheikh" which is the title given to a group of Muslim preachers from Arabia (Hadramaut) who went down the Chepir River (a river located in the middle of Sik town) to carry out da'wah activities around the 17th century. The Malay Sik originally came from Pattani Malays that open land in the western region in the province of the Kedah Sultanate regime. The word "Sheikh" is a title given to the Arab preachers who eventually changed to Sek or Saik. The pronunciation of Sik is according to the dialect of the Pattani people which was eventually accepted as the name of this district.

Sik Town or known as Pekan Sik is a small town and can also be categorized as a village. Around 2017, Sik Town has started to develop and today there are innumerable facilities such as public hall, wide road, bank, mini stadium, and more. There are many rivers in Sik district and in Sik Town, there is also a river called the Chepir river. The riverbank is a focal area where economic activities, leisure, and recreational activities of the local community were held. And Sik District Council is the main pillar in planning and developing the Sik town area.

According to Puan Munirah (2020) who is an officer in the Sik District Council, Kedah stated that various plans need to be done in the square but the allocation is still insufficient. The involvement of other parties such as the private sector, Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) is still lacking in helping the development of Sik Town. She added that one of their plans is to make the area as the main identity of the community of Sik district by planting their official flowers that are commonly found in the area, namely pandanus variegated (golden) plant. Apart from that, the use of pavilions is also seen to have the potential to connect leaders and the local community because religious activities are often held for improving the knowledge of the community. Pedestrian walkways are also available but are somewhat idle and rest shelters have not been properly maintained

Ulu Muda Lake, Sik, Kedah



a



b



c d  
Fig. 3. (a) Entrance to Ulu Muda Eco Park; (b) Abandoned buildings  
(c) Idle areas (d) Freshwater fish collection and distribution area

Ulu Muda Eco Park is a state heritage forest and is very rich with various species of flora and fauna. It is located 23km from Sik Town. Ulu Muda is rich in flora characteristics with the elements of Thai-Burmese which have existed since 130 million years ago. There are some interesting limestone caves for visitors to view the species of bats that consist of 53% of the species found in Malaysia. There are also 109 species of fauna including 17 large mammals such as elephants and tapirs as well as endangered species. The park is the largest watershed area that can fill three main man-made dams, i.e. Ahning Dam, Muda Dam, and Pedu Dam which covers 163,103 hectares of rainforest, and supplies 80 percent of water supply in Penang, Kedah (96 percent), and Perlis (70 percent). In fact, it also forms the source of water to more than 4.09 million people as well as thousands of businesses in the states of Perlis, Kedah, and Penang.

Ulu Muda Eco Park also has the potential to be an eco-tourism destination equivalent to or beyond the Forests in Perak and Taman Negara in Pahang. In addition, there are 117 mammals recorded in this Ulu Muda Eco Park. There is also habitat to over 170 species of birds. Apart from terrestrial animals, fish in dams and rivers also attract anglers, and even honey has long been an icon to Pedu Forest and Ulu Muda. The peaceful atmosphere and geographical conditions there encourage activities such as camping, bird watching, and wildlife, fishing, and river/lake activities. Such activities are very popular among foreign tourists as well as the young generations in Malaysia. Ulu Muda Eco Park is very much in line with the current trends of tourism, but the existence of interesting activities that exist in Eco Part is still unknown, especially to foreign tourists from Kedah. Promotion from the parties involved still does not reach the maximum level. However, in the opinion of researchers, the opening of Ulu Muda Eco Park as an eco-tourism destination needs to be carefully planned and regulated to prevent damage and pollution.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that Sik district is like the gold mine for the tourism sector. However, Sik district, especially as an eco or sustainable tourism has never been studied upon. These places such as Ulu Muda Eco Park, which is rich in natural beauty, and Sri



Lovely, an organic rice cultivation valley, not only that they can be used as a tourist destination but also suitable as an Edu Tourism centre and a lifelong learning centre. Meanwhile, the shores of Chepir River, located in the middle of Sik Town, are the main identity of Sik Town where all activities for the local community take place. Therefore, it can be an attraction for foreign tourists to visit and enjoy Sik's main dishes and buy local products. The pull factor that makes Sik suitable as a tourist destination is the natural beauty found in Sik itself such as Ulu Muda Eco Park; a place with a biodiversity that is nowhere to be found. Furthermore, the success of Sri Lovely being recognized at the world level is something to be proud of. In the meantime, the push factor is the lack of involvement from the local community, especially from the private sector and non-governmental organizations. As a consequence, it will lead to another push factor which is financial constraints, in the efforts to develop and maintain potential areas as tourist areas in Sik.

Issues and challenges in developing tourism in Sik District need to be faced with various ongoing efforts and strategies. The Sik District community will benefit from domestic and foreign visits. This can indirectly encourage local economic activity. A well-structured and researched strategic plan needs to be made to find ways to develop potential places in Sik. Therefore, this study is expected to be one of the basic platforms that can finally gather various parties whether the government, private sectors, and NGOs in continuing the heritage and environment survival in Sik.

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